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Defining Dilemmas Down:

The Case of 24

Abstract: *One of the most important concepts in the field of political ethics is the idea of a moral dilemma – understood as a situation in which an agent’s public responsibilities and moral imperatives conflict in such a way that no matter what the agent does she will in some way be committing a moral wrong. In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, the notion of a moral dilemma has undergone a profound reconceptualization in American political discourse, and there has perhaps been no more important cultural forum for that conceptual revision than the quintessential post-9/11 melodrama, FOX Television’s 24. This paper first describes and then critically evaluates America’s new model moral dilemma as portrayed on 24. Focusing specifically on 24’s Season Five (the year the show won the Emmy for Best Dramatic Series), the paper shows how 24’s creators have substituted in the public mind almost a parody of the standard philosophical account of a moral dilemma in place of the traditional notion. Their methods for this conceptual revision have included both an extravagant, even baroque portrayal of the grand dilemmas which confront Jack Bauer and his fellow patriots, on the one hand, and on the other, a subtle de-valuing of the moral stakes in the more pedestrian variety of moral conflicts Bauer and company must overcome in their quest to keep America safe whatever the cost.*

Most studies in the now-growing field of “philosophy and popular culture” follow a familiar pattern: they employ a popular text (novel, play, film, or television program) as a means of illustrating an important philosophical truth.¹ This essay differs from that pattern in at least one important respect: it employs a prominent and influential popular

¹ For a discussion of philosophical approaches to this subject matter, see William Irwin and Jorge J.E. Garcia, eds., *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). For examples of practice, see Paul A. Cantor, *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001) as well as the *Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series*, edited by William Irwin (Blackwell), one volume of which I rely on extensively in what follows, namely Jennifer Hart Weed, Richard Davis, and Ronald Weed, eds., *24 and Philosophy: The World According to Jack* (Blackwell, 2008).

text (FOX's television drama *24*) to describe and then critique an important philosophical falsehood. My premise is that this kind of critical engagement with popular culture can be just as valuable as the more interpretive approach, and that in many cases it may indeed be more significant, since the impact of letting philosophical mistakes go unchallenged in our culture may well prove to be more consequential than any effect we could hope for positive philosophical truths to produce.

One of the most important concepts in the field of political ethics is the idea of a moral dilemma – understood as a situation in which an agent's public responsibilities and moral imperatives conflict in such a way that no matter what the agent does she will in some way be committing a moral wrong.² In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, there has been a profound reconceptualization of the common-sense notion of a moral dilemma in American political discourse, and one of the most important cultural forums for that conceptual revision has been the quintessential post-9/11 melodrama, FOX Television's *24*. Many regard Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), the hero of *24*, as a kind of avatar of the post-9/11 age. In the May 15, 2007 Republican debate in South Carolina, for example, presidential candidate Tom Tancredo had this to say about the question of torture:

You say that nuclear devices have gone off in the United States, more are planned, and we're wondering about whether waterboarding would be a bad thing to do? I'm looking for Jack Bauer at that time! ... We are the last best hope of Western Civilization. When we go under, Western Civilization goes under.³

² On the concept of moral dilemmas, see the essays collected in Christopher Gowans, ed., *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

³ FOX News debate, May 15, 2007. Bauer's idolization is not uniform on the right. In response to a question on torture at a recent debate, Sen. John McCain admonished his fellow GOP presidential candidates that "... I would hope that we would understand, my friends, that life is not *24* and Jack Bauer." CNN debate, Nov. 28, 2007.

More generally, conservative voices have praised the show for its “political and moral toughness.” According to this view, *24* illustrates such “enduring truths” as these: “that war affords few opportunities for moral purity; that we must still have the courage to make distinctions between unpleasant options, and act on our choices; that one does not have to be innocent to be right.”⁴ The same article goes on to describe Jack Bauer as “basically a superhero” and to argue that the show teaches valuable moral lessons for the post-9/11 era:

24 as a whole is patriotic in its honesty about the nature of our adversaries and its refusal to indulge in the moral equivocation favored by the most critically lauded television dramas. You never hear CTU [Counter Terrorist Unit] characters wondering while perched over their computers, “Why do they hate us?” or fretting that “we’re just as bad as they are.”⁵

In the public mind, Jack Bauer is, if not the exemplary man of his era, at least a leading and widely touted candidate for that role.

This attitude says something rather troubling about our society’s ethical outlook; and we can see this perhaps most clearly through considering how *24* as a narrative proposes to revise the traditional philosophical notion of a moral dilemma for the post-9/11 age. Such an examination is what I undertake in this essay. Several recently published academic essays on *24* have suggested that the show is an especially promising forum for studying the concept of a moral dilemma.⁶ I want to argue that on the contrary, given the show’s implicit account of what a moral dilemma is, *24* is an exceptionally *bad* forum for considering what moral dilemmas are or how we should approach them.

⁴ Paul Beston, “Getting Dirty in Real Time,” *The American Spectator* (July/August 2005).

⁵ Beston, “Getting Dirty.” It is unclear which critically lauded dramas Beston is referring to in his later comment; to my knowledge, no character on *The West Wing*, for example, ever exhibits either of the two worries he outlines.

⁶ See in particular Randall M. Jensen, “What Would Jack Bauer Do? Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory in *24*,” and Stephen de Wijze, “Between Hero and Villain: Jack Bauer and the Problem of ‘Dirty Hands’”, both in *24 and Philosophy*.

Focusing specifically on *24*'s Season Five (the year the show won the Emmy for Best Dramatic Series), this essay will show how *24* relies implicitly on a false philosophical account of what constitutes a moral dilemma. Instead, *24*'s creators have substituted in the public mind almost a parody of the traditional philosophical account of a moral dilemma. Their methods for this conceptual revision have included both an extravagant, even baroque portrayal of the grand dilemmas which confront Jack Bauer and his fellow patriots, on the one hand, and on the other, a subtle de-valuing of the moral stakes in the more pedestrian variety of ethical conflicts Bauer and company must overcome in their quest to keep America safe, whatever the cost. Furthermore, since Bauer and CTU are the agents and defenders of the United States, *24* also seems to imply that the ethical permissions these agents possess are merely a particular instance of a more general range of moral rights and privileges which America itself possesses in the post-9/11 age. If so, then *24*'s account of moral dilemmas may have profound consequences: for if *24*'s effect is to systematically deny that there are serious moral dilemmas inherent in many or most of the choices its characters make, it may be misleading not just Bauer and CTU, but America as well, about the ethically problematic dimensions of similar choices in the real world.

The Ethics of *24*

When *24* premiered in the fall of 2001, a few weeks after 9/11, its chief novelty was its unconventional narrative structure. Nothing like its gimmick of twenty-four episodes, each containing one hour's worth of action in "real-time," had ever been attempted before on television, and this aspect of it engaged the most critical comment at

the time. But from the long view, *24*'s most novel contribution was not an innovation of style but rather of character. In Jack Bauer we find perhaps the first character on television (and one of a very few in literature more generally) who is both ready to perform torture and other atrocities at a moment's notice if necessary, *and* still meets the conventional standards of "hero" rather than "antihero."⁷ Jack Bauer is not Tony Soprano: he is meant to receive not merely our empathy but also our admiration.

In some ways Bauer's approach to the moral dimensions of his actions implies that we are meant to regard him as the ultimate utilitarian.⁸ Repeatedly Bauer shows an unhesitating willingness to sacrifice the few – especially himself – to save the lives of the many, with no residual moral qualms.⁹ Perhaps Bauer would not be such a thoroughgoing utilitarian in private life, but the scale of consequences for which he is responsible in the recurring crises of his world contrives to push utilitarian considerations relentlessly to the fore. The life or death of a president, the threat of nuclear holocaust in Los Angeles, viral outbreaks, impending wars, coups d'état in the American government

⁷ A few years later, Sayid Jarrah on ABC's *Lost* would provide a second example, though Sayid is much more troubled by his acts of torture than Jack Bauer is. Bauer himself would probably realize the unusual narrative dimensions of his status as a protagonist, since (according to an official show handbook) he was an undergraduate English major at UCLA.

⁸ For an outline of utilitarianism as an ethical doctrine, see Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Dover, 2007) and John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford University Press, 1991). For applications of utilitarianism specifically to the problem of moral dilemmas, see R.B. Brandt, "Utilitarianism and the Rules of War," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 145-165, and R.M. Hare, "Moral Conflicts," in Gowans, ed., *Moral Dilemmas*; for more critical views, see Thomas Nagel, "War and Massacre," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 123-144., and Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Consequentialism," in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁹ In later seasons, Bauer does appear to suffer to a certain degree from greater misgivings about his vocation and the worth of the choices and sacrifices it forces upon him. I attribute this shift in tone primarily to two factors. First, there does seem to be a growth in the overall number of moral dilemmas faced from season to season in *24*: Season 5, for example, appears to be (on average) more rife with dilemmas than Season 1. Second, this may reflect a certain degree of psychological realism in how Bauer's character is written: having faced so many dilemmas over so many years, the toll they have taken on what Alasdair MacIntyre has called "the narrative unity of a human life" will naturally be greater in later seasons than in earlier ones. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd. ed. (Notre Dame, 1983), ch. 15.

– these are the consequences he must reckon with on an hourly basis. It is an appeal to the good of the many, therefore, that grounds Bauer’s willingness to break all the familiar moral rules – murder, torture, threatening and even killing innocent bystanders. “That’s the problem with people like you, George,” Bauer says to a squeamish superior. “You want results, but you never want to get your hands dirty. I’d start rolling up your sleeves,” he continues, before reaching for a hacksaw to cut up the body of the man he has just killed in cold blood.(2, 8am).¹⁰ If Bauer were an unwavering utilitarian, we might expect that his utilitarianism would lead him to discount entirely the possibility of the existence of a true moral dilemma. After all, if utility is the only value that truly matters, then by definition it cannot conflict irresolvably with rival values. But this is not the whole of the story.

Bauer is decidedly, even chillingly open to transgressing the traditional norms of morality when necessary, relying on ostensibly utilitarian justifications when he does so. But in addition to his apparent utilitarian commitments, Bauer nevertheless also lives by a code of strict (if rather unusual) ethical principles that do not seem to map onto utilitarianism so neatly.¹¹ Indeed, early in the series Bauer is viewed by his fellow CTU agents as almost priggishly high-minded, largely because of his willingness in the recent past to inform on colleagues engaged in corrupt practices. Bauer’s explanation of his actions to his colleague Nina Myers in the series’ very first episode reveals the rigid moral code underlying what would otherwise seem to be his extravagant claims to ethical permissions and excuses.

¹⁰ I employ the following method for referencing the episodes: (2, 8am) meaning the episode portraying the events that occur between 8am and 9am on Day 2 (or more conventionally, in Season 2).

¹¹ I do not think this disjunction conveys anything systematic about Bauer’s underlying moral theory (such as some complex form of rule utilitarianism); rather, it seems to reflect a sort of moral particularism (or, less charitably, an eclectic inconsistency in his moral beliefs).

BAUER: You can look the other way once, and it's no big deal, except it makes it easier for you to compromise the next time, and pretty soon, that's all you're doing is compromising because that's how you think things are done. You know those guys I blew the whistle on: you think they were the bad guys? 'Cause they weren't, they weren't bad guys, they were just like you and me. Except they compromised – once. (1,12am)

In Bauer's world, ethical compromise inevitably leads to the loss of one's moral compass altogether. Sometimes it is clear that this moral absolutism of Jack's is enlisted in the service of utilitarian imperatives: utilitarianism is the right way to make moral decisions, but those decisions once arrived at acquire the unbending force of a categorical imperative, leaving no room for uncertainty or nuance.¹² Still, on other (though admittedly rarer) occasions, Bauer seems to invoke the same rigid absolutist ethics *against* utilitarian considerations, as when (in Season 5) he refuses to allow a nerve gas canister to go off in a shopping mall full of innocent civilians even though his refusal may cost CTU their best chance of locating the terrorists and the remaining nineteen canisters of nerve gas.¹³

Bauer, which translates from German as "peasant" or "farmer," is also the German word for "pawn." At many moments Bauer does in fact seem to be a mere pawn, moved about by menacing, unseen hands; but if so he is always a crucial pawn, fortuitously placed to check or block the most important square on the board. As its time-related gimmickry might suggest, *24* is pervaded by an almost palpable sense of urgency and desperation. Alfred Hitchcock famously argued that narrative suspense hinged on the pursuit of an ultimately arbitrary object – he called it the "MacGuffin" –

¹² Bauer's absolutism is made somewhat easier to stomach, of course, by the fact that under conditions of uncertainty about results and consequences, Bauer's judgments invariably turn out to be right. On this point see further Rob Lawlor, "Who Dares Sins: Jack Bauer and Moral Luck," in *24 and Philosophy*.

¹³ See Randall M. Jensen, "What Would Jack Bauer Do?: Moral Dilemmas and Moral Theory in *24*," in *24 and Philosophy*.

which served as a focus for the characters' energies.¹⁴ In *24*, the consistent "MacGuffin" that organizes the story is at any given moment what Bauer and his co-workers invariably describe as "our only lead." Anything that a CTU agent can characterize as constituting "our only lead" to the threatening conspiracy justifies our investing that "lead" with all the moral weight of the worst possible outcome.¹⁵

What exemplifies this sense of urgency in *24* perhaps better than anything else is the case of the so-called "ticking time bomb scenario" about which much has been written in the popular press since the events of 9/11.¹⁶ The familiar scenario is this: if you knew a captured terrorist possessed vital intelligence about the imminent explosion of a nuclear device in an urban area, and also believed that torturing the terrorist was likely (though perhaps not certain) to yield the vital information (and that no other technique was likely to do so), is it morally permissible to authorize the torture? This is a grave philosophical question, and no ethicist I know denies the difficulty of resolving it in a way that accords with all our important normative intuitions. Michael Walzer was the first prominent philosopher to discuss the "ticking time bomb scenario" in his seminal article on the concept of a moral dilemma.¹⁷ In that article, Walzer held that the ticking time bomb case was a quintessential instance of a moral dilemma. But he also insisted that it was an unusual and extreme case, and therefore not to be trusted as a general guide

¹⁴ Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, rev. ed. (Paladin, 1978), esp. ch. 6, pp. 191-195.

¹⁵ On the corollary doctrine in post-9/11 foreign policy, see further Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine* (Simon and Shuster, 2007).

¹⁶ See Alan Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works* (Yale University Press, 2002); Sanford Levinson, ed., *Torture: A Collection* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Charles Krauthammer, "The Truth About Torture," *Weekly Standard* (Dec. 5, 2005); and Andrew Sullivan, "The Abolition of Torture," *New Republic* (Dec. 19, 2005); and Bob Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb* (Blackwell, 2007).

¹⁷ Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973): 160-180.

to questions such as the moral permissibility of torture.¹⁸ (Indeed, Jane Mayer has recently reported that throughout the thousands of interrogations since 9/11, the ticking time bomb scenario has “never actually occurred,” according to “one of the few U.S. officials with full access to the details.”)¹⁹

The key to the ethical sleight of hand which 24 performs lies in recognizing its attempt to use the peculiarities of its real-time narrative structure to turn the ticking time bomb scenario into a constant state of being. Not only is the time bomb ticking, we even hear the ticking itself, audibly, in appropriately electronic digital tones, before and after each commercial break. The effect of this is to turn the extreme moral conditions of the ticking time bomb scenario into an everyday operating environment – such that our conclusions about that scenario, once reached, can be taken as a given in any future moral calculations without qualm, and without the necessity of having to rethink the quandary itself from the ground up. This has the predictable but nevertheless significant effect, as we will see further below, of making it much easier to redefine the concept of a moral dilemma itself in a more accessible and user-friendly – and ethically permissive – style.

Varieties of Moral Dilemmas

In contemporary philosophical ethics, the concept of a moral dilemma implies the existence of a choice in which some degree of wrongdoing is unavoidable.²⁰ Like most philosophical concepts, the terminology is often applied more loosely than this in popular

¹⁸ Walzer did not believe that true moral dilemmas were restricted to such extreme cases, however; he offers a more mundane example of a politician who accepts a contribution from a shady contractor in order to win an election the outcome of which carries vital consequences to the community.

¹⁹ Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side*, (Doubleday, 2008), p. 330).

²⁰ On this point, compare Bernard Williams, “Ethical Consistency” with Alan Donagan, “Consistency in Rationalist Moral Systems,” both collected in Gowans, ed., *Moral Dilemmas*. See also Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1990).

discourse. Any morally troubling or difficult choice may be described as a “dilemma”: but this looser popular sense of the term does not capture the interesting philosophical problem which the stricter definition captures. Moral choice is often difficult: what sets the concept of a dilemma apart is its requirement of a conflict of practical ethical imperatives resulting from an underlying and irresolvable conflict of moral values. It is this stricter sense of the term “dilemma” that is the focus of the analysis that follows.

At the same time as I am employing a strict definition of a moral dilemma, in seeking to trace the concept’s exploration through a text like *24* there is no way to employ a strict measurement as well as a strict definition. To some degree dilemmas must always ultimately be dilemmas in the eye of the beholder: the dilemmatic character of a particular choice situation is always at least partly agent-relative, since a dilemma is just an irresolvable conflict of practical ethical imperatives for *this* agent in *this* choice situation. In studying the treatment of moral dilemmas in a text like *24*, then, one’s identification of specific choice situations confronting specific agents as dilemmas (or not) will require judgments that are necessarily subjective (though not of course arbitrary). Here I rely on Aristotle’s injunction that the student of politics can apply to any given question confronting him just as much precision as the subject matter admits of, and no more.²¹ We can study moral dilemmas in a text like *24* only by recognizing that our identification of some choice situations as dilemmas, and others as non-dilemmas, will necessarily be subject to contestation and disagreement.

Nevertheless, while our subject matter may not admit of objective measurement, we can still be analytically rigorous in defining the criteria we use. So I want to begin by

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. David Ross, (Oxford University Press, 1980), 1094b12-1095a6

offering a distinction between a *moral dilemma* (strictly speaking) and a broader category of problem which I want to identify as a *moral quandary*. I offer the following definitions of the two terms:

- *Moral dilemma* (strictly speaking) – a choice in which, no matter what an agent chooses, she will be in some important sense doing something wrong – that is, in which there remains a residual wrongness to the choice not fully made up for by its benefits.
- *Moral quandary* – a broader category than that of a moral dilemma, this is a choice which contains substantial moral difficulty, even if there is a right course of action available – a troubling moral choice, though not necessarily an insoluble one. Moral dilemmas are a subcategory of moral quandaries.

In the analysis that follows, I will be concerned with *24*'s portrayal of both moral quandaries and moral dilemmas, though my focus will be on how *24*'s approach to ethical problems tends to collapse the distinction and thus erode the status of a moral dilemma as a special and specially meaningful type of moral difficulty.

Let me illustrate what I mean with reference to a moral dilemma from the first season of *24* which the show itself clearly recognizes as such. In Season 1, Jack Bauer's daughter Kim is kidnapped by terrorists plotting to assassinate presidential candidate David Palmer. The terrorists credibly threaten to kill Kim unless Bauer uses his security credentials to gain entrance to a Palmer campaign event and assassinate Palmer himself. (1, 5am-8am). Bauer faces an ethical choice in which no matter what he does, he will in some sense be committing a moral wrong.²² In this situation, the intractable nature of the dilemma results from a conflict of moral duties, neither of which Bauer can rightly abandon: his duty to protect innocent life and serve his country, on the one hand, and his

²² Of course from the perspective of certain moral views, for example those which do not recognize special moral responsibilities to family separate from general moral responsibilities to humanity, or those which make a strong distinction between the moral status of actions versus omissions of action, it might appear that there is no moral *wrong* here. But *24* gives no indication that it holds such a theory, and certainly does not promote such a view consistently.

special obligation to do whatever he must to protect his daughter's life, on the other. This is not just a difficult ethical choice, requiring the moral agent to accept costs and make sacrifices, or to impose them on others. It is instead an insoluble dilemma, because there is no morally safe choice available to the agent: whatever Bauer does will, in some important sense, count as having done the wrong thing, and consequently he will, in some important sense, have become a morally guilty man.²³ As President David Palmer says of a moral dilemma he confronts later in the series, "Sometimes you have to do the wrong thing for the right reasons." (3, 4pm)

This, then, is how I conceive (and how most philosophers conceive) of a moral dilemma, strictly speaking. How then do we trace the treatment of this concept in a text like the television drama 24? I think we will first want to have some standard for identifying what ordinary observers would standardly categorize as moral dilemmas and moral quandaries (as defined above), and then for comparing these standard dilemmas with the way they are characterized by the show 24. I therefore first offer two definitions of dilemmas or quandaries as they would be perceived by ordinary observers, which I call *standard dilemmas* and *standard quandaries*:

- *Standard dilemma* – a choice which an impartial and virtuous spectator, sharing roughly the values, sensibilities, and responsibilities of the agent, would tend to regard as constituting a moral dilemma (strictly construed).²⁴
- *Standard quandary* – a choice which an impartial and virtuous spectator, sharing roughly the values, sensibilities, and responsibilities of the agent, would tend to regard as a moral quandary. (For example, I count every instance of lying and every instance of serious violence as a moral quandary, on the assumption that any impartial and virtuous agent would find any instance of lying or violence

²³ On guilt as a feature of moral dilemmas, see Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," along with Suzanne Dovi, "Guilt and the Problem of Dirty Hands," *Constellations* 12: 128-146.

²⁴ Here I employ a very old procedure of moral judgment recommended by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Liberty Fund, 1984), esp. at III.1 and *passim*.

(excluding self-defense) to be at least morally troubling and a cause for hesitation.)

Since my use of these standards is inherently subjective, we should attach no great importance to the fact if we should discover that *24*'s treatment of moral dilemmas does not square exactly with my own identification of them. But if on the other hand we were to find that there are large and systematic variations between *24*'s treatment of dilemmas on the one hand and standard dilemmas on the other – that is, if *24* routinely characterized choice situations as dilemmas or non-dilemmas in ways that diverged dramatically from my own (or any impartial, attentive and reflective reader's) identification of them -- that would be a basis for supposing that some larger piece of conceptual or ethical revisionism was at work.

Finally, therefore, since I will be concerned in this paper specifically with the portrayal of moral dilemmas by *24* – and since the situations *24* identifies implicitly as dilemmas may not be identical with standard dilemmas (indeed as we will see they are quite different) – I offer two additional categories of analysis, the *24 dilemma* and the *24 quandary*:

- *24 dilemma* – a choice which *24* as a text treats as if it were a moral dilemma. – as indicated by the attention, tone, emphasis, and information given about the problem. (For example, character's statements of regret would be one important indicator that a choice counts as a *24* dilemma).
- *24 quandary* – a choice which *24* as a text treats as if it were a moral quandary – as indicated by the attention, tone, emphasis and information given about the problem.

I employ these categories in my analysis of the show *24* in the subsequent sections of this paper.

What I find, in brief, is that *24* takes the tragic conflicts associated with true moral dilemmas and transposes them to a new register of melodrama that turns tragedy into farce. To characterize *24* as a farce in the technical sense, even loosely speaking, may seem perverse, since it is (overtly) among the most humorless shows in the history of television. (In six seasons, as best I can tell, no character has ever laughed, nor has any character ever made a joke).²⁵ But *24* does in effect recast tragedy as farce, by taking the melodramatic core of tragedy – and on at least one prominent theory of tragedy, value conflict is itself the substance of that core – and making it into a kind of parody of itself.²⁶ The rare choice situations which *24* is willing to treat as authentic moral dilemmas are in effect parodies of the standard account of a moral dilemma – baroque, grandiose, insoluble dilemmas invoking conflicts and consequences on an incalculable scale. The effect of this, as we will see, is to remove the idea of authentic moral dilemmas further and further from reality, while in turn devaluing and delegitimizing standard dilemmas wherever they occur, and particularly whenever they can plausibly invoke “the good of the nation” as their justification.

To be fair, it is doubtful that *24* deliberately aims to promote any particular moral or political vision. Rather, the moral and political ideology it adopts is the necessary backdrop for the narrative and (for want of a better word) artistic work it is trying to do: namely, to carry the concept of melodrama through to its logical conclusion.

Nevertheless, the moral and political backdrop which *24* requires for its narrative to work

²⁵ Of course, not many of the *characters* laugh in any television show. There was little actual laughter at the bar at *Cheers* or in Jerry Seinfeld’s apartment or at the Bluth model home, though there were of course plenty of jokes. (The Simpson family does occasionally laugh, but almost invariably in ironic circumstances, as while watching Itchy and Scratchy’s murderous exploits – or they are laughed at, as by local bully Nelson Muntz).

²⁶ For exposition and critical discussion of the theory that this kind of value conflict constitutes the essence of tragedy, see *Hegel on Tragedy*, ed. Anne and Henry Paolucci (Griffin House Publishing, 2001), and Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

is a familiar and influential ideological picture of the world; and in making use of that picture as it does, *24* both refines and expands the potential significance of that picture as a backdrop for other, more consequential activities. As Plato warned us, the theater is our most powerful public teacher, and what is done there has far-reaching repercussions for who we are and for what characters and what actions we come to view as fine and just.²⁷ So it is fair for philosophers to render some judgments about the work of cultural revisionism that *24* is, deliberately or not, undertaking in effect. The fact that *24* does not portray moral dilemmas in a manner consistent with the standard account is not a necessary consequence of either the show's form or of its forum.²⁸ It is instead a deliberate narrative choice, one deriving from a distinct philosophical outlook. I turn in the remaining sections of the paper to the problem of describing and then evaluating *24*'s view of moral dilemmas in the post-9/11 world.

Standard Moral Dilemmas in *24*

For this paper, I reviewed the first five seasons of *24* (and I can report that there is wide variation in the quality and enjoyment of the various seasons as drama). I also conducted a closer study of Season 5, which was the year that *24* won the Emmy Award for Best Drama, and is considered by most viewers to have been at least among the show's best seasons. I coded the events of the 24 hours of that day according to the criteria discussed in the last section, identifying as a standard quandary any morally troubling situation and as a standard dilemma any choice characterized by a moral

²⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith and ed. G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 376e-417b, 595b-608b.

²⁸ For comparison, see the subtle and intricately wrought moral dilemma presented contemporaneously with *24*'s first season (and shortly after the events of 9/11) on NBC's *The West Wing*, Season Three, episodes 21 ("We Killed Yamamoto") and 22 ("Posse Comitatus").

conflict not fully resolvable (employing my own subjective but educated ethical judgment in categorizing the choices). I followed a few rules consistently in coding: for instance, I coded as a standard quandary any instance of deception or betrayal not directed against an enemy; any act of violence not directed against an enemy; and any lethal use of violence when not in self-defense.²⁹ Any instance of torture conducted by a protagonist I automatically coded as a standard dilemma, on the view that there is always something residually wrong about torture even if it may conceivably be the best thing to do on balance.³⁰ Beyond this, I simply employed my own best judgment. I then further coded as a “24 quandary” or as a “24 dilemma” any standard quandary or standard dilemma which I felt 24 itself, as a text, acknowledged to be such (through attention, tone, emphasis, and related narrative techniques).

My close study of Season 5 confirmed an impression I had gained while watching the other seasons more casually: namely, that there is a significant discrepancy between the number of situations that would qualify as a “standard quandary” or “standard dilemma” under the criteria developed earlier and the number of cases that 24 itself acknowledges to be true moral quandaries or dilemmas. I first want to detail this discrepancy and offer some examples of it, and then draw my conclusion: that the discrepancy uses a variety of narrative devices to mask its controversial (and mistaken) revision of the traditional philosophical notion of a moral dilemma.

²⁹ Whether it is ever right to use such means even against one’s enemies is a question as old as Book I of Plato’s *Republic*. If (contrary to my own belief) it is always wrong to do so, then my own coding will be substantially *underestimating* the number of moral quandaries and dilemmas in 24. (Who counts as an enemy is similarly tricky, but for simplicity’s sake I count anyone who could reasonably be believed to be deliberately engaged in a crime or threat against the public as an “enemy” in the relevant sense.)

³⁰ See Michael Walzer, “Political Action: the Problem of Dirty Hands,” cited above, for an argument supporting this presumption, along with Henry Shue, “Torture,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 7 (1978): 124-143.

The first thing to note about the presence of moral quandaries and moral dilemmas in the narrative of *24* is that they are vastly more plentiful on the show than one would expect to find in ordinary life. In traditional philosophical ethics, a moral quandary (that is, a standard quandary) ought to be the exception rather than the rule in ordinary life, while a moral dilemma (that is, a standard dilemma) should be a very rare occurrence indeed. Standard quandaries should confront most moral agents infrequently, and the large majority of moral agents might be expected to go their whole lives experiencing at most a handful of standard dilemmas. This is of course partly a function of the various characters' roles and responsibilities in the story of *24*: almost all of them work in the high-risk, high-consequence field of counter-terrorism or in the (notoriously) ethically problematic field of politics and governance. Even counting for this, however, the scale of the discrepancy is quite striking. In Season 5 of *24*, for example, the characters experience (by my count) a total of 89 separate standard quandaries and 39 separate standard dilemmas in one 24-hour period. This comes to approximately 3.7 quandaries and 1.6 dilemmas per hour.

TABLE ONE	Standard Model	24 Model
Quandaries	89	45
Dilemmas	39	10

I provide an episode-by-episode accounting of my coding results in an Appendix.

To illustrate the point, let me offer now an example of how I coded the quandaries and dilemmas I observed a representative hour of *24*. The hour in question occurs from

1pm-2pm on Day 5 (that is, Season 5). In this hour, I identified three ethically significant choice situations, all faced by Jack Bauer:

- Jack Bauer Returns to CTU. President Charles Logan insists that Bauer – who has left CTU and is believed to be dead by everyone, including his daughter, Kim – must return to active duty to help stop an ongoing terrorist conspiracy that threatens thousands of lives across Los Angeles. Bauer knows that, given his training and experience, he can greatly increase the likelihood of foiling the terrorists and saving lives; but accepting Logan’s charge also means that his daughter will likely have to go through the emotional trauma of learning he is still alive. *This choice situation I identified as both a standard quandary and a 24 quandary, since Bauer seems torn by the moral costs of the choice and deliberates about the trade-off. I do not identify the choice as either a standard dilemma or a moral dilemma, since there is no wrongdoing as such (though there are certainly costs and sacrifices involved) in the decision to let his daughter know he is alive.*
- Bauer Tortures a Conspirator. Bauer and CTU capture a terrorist conspirator who is now their “only lead” to a larger conspiracy to release nerve gas in multiple locations in Los Angeles. Bauer shoots the conspirator in the leg, refuses to allow him to receive pain medication, and begins applying direct methods of torture to elicit the needed information. *This choice situation I identify as a standard quandary and standard dilemma, and as a 24 quandary but not a 24 dilemma. On my criteria torture automatically qualifies for the status of a standard dilemma, since there is always something residually wrong about the*

use of torture even if its use may turn out to be the best available choice under tragically difficult circumstances. 24 does appreciate this choice as a quandary – there is hesitation by some CTU personnel over the decision to withhold pain medication – but not as a dilemma, as Bauer himself shows no hesitation to apply torture and expresses no hint of regret.³¹

- Bauer Accepts a Troubling Deal. The conspirator, Rossler, makes a deal with CTU to turn over the microchip controlling the nerve gas canisters in exchange for full immunity and safe passage from the country. His deal also includes permission to take with him Inessa, a fifteen year old girl who has been kidnapped in order to be sold as a sex slave. Bauer tries to talk CTU out of making the deal, but in the end he accepts the deal and leads Inessa away to go with Rossler. *This situation I coded not only as a standard quandary and standard dilemma but also a 24 quandary and 24 dilemma. Like the previous choice, there is clearly something wrong about both failing to acquire the information needed to save thousands of lives and failing to protect a child from being sold into slavery. Whichever Bauer chooses, he will remain guilty of the other wrong. But in this instance, 24 recognizes the dilemmatic nature of the choice, as evinced by Bauer’s arguing against making the trade before finally accepting its necessity.*

³¹ This is typical of Bauer’s attitude toward torture throughout the series. Consider this representative quotation from Bauer interrogating a prisoner: “You probably don’t think I could force this towel down your throat, but trust me, I can. All the way. Except that I’d hold onto this little bit at the end. When your stomach starts to digest the towel, I pull it out. Taking your stomach lining with it. Most people probably take about a week to die. It’s very painful.” (1, 10am). For more detailed discussions of the treatment of torture in 24, see Jane Mayer, “What It Takes,” *The New Yorker* (Feb. 19, 2007); Douglas L. Howard, “You’re Going To Tell Me Everything You Know: Torture and Morality in Fox’s 24,” in Steven Peacock, ed., *Reading 24: TV Against the Clock* (I.B. Tauris, 2007); and Donal P. O’Mathuna, “The Ethics of Torture in 24: Shockingly Banal,” in *24 and Philosophy*.

As Table One shows, there is a massive discrepancy between the number of (standard) moral dilemmas faced by the characters on *24* and the number that we would typically expect to be experienced by a small number of moral agents in reality in any 24-hour period, even in the high-stress, high-stakes world of counter-terrorism. The scale of this discrepancy is concealed, however, by the fact that *24* itself, using a variety of narrative devices, recognizes only about half of the standard quandaries as *24* quandaries, and only about a quarter of the standard dilemmas as *24* dilemmas. Here are some examples of choice situations which I identified as standard quandaries but which *24* did not characterize as moral quandaries:

- Jack Attacks an FBI Agent (5, 8am) – Jack Bauer, wrongly suspected of murder and on the run from CTU, attacks an FBI agent (with non-lethal force) to obtain his credentials in order search the crime scene. *This is a repeatedly-used form of standard quandary through the series, as Bauer and others unhesitatingly use non-lethal violence against non-hostiles including law enforcement agents when it helps them pursue their objectives.*
- Chloe Helps Jack (5, 8am) – CTU analyst Chloe O'Brien assists Jack Bauer in pursuing leads and avoiding pursuit by CTU, in contradiction to the clear, lawful, and reasonable orders of her superiors. *This is another form of standard quandary that is repeatedly employed throughout the series, yet rarely if ever is perceived by the show or its characters to constitute an ethical issue.*
- Kim Cuts Herself Off from Jack (5, 7pm) – Kim Bauer has just learned that her father (Jack) is still alive and has been reunited with him. However, even though

she loves her father, Kim Bauer declares that she will not see him any more for the sake of her own emotional well-being. *Surely this is a kind of moral quandary, even if there is a best thing to do on balance without a residual moral wrong to complicate the choice.*

- Chloe Tasers a Suitor (5, 2am) – Though it may beggar belief to those not accustomed to following 24's rather odd moral compass, Chloe O'Brien actually employs a taser on a guy coming onto her in a bar because he is distracting her from providing online mission support to Jack (who is, incidentally, engaged in hijacking an airplane at the time). *No inkling of an ethical problem is raised about this choice, though there are non-overt indications that it is meant to get laughs.*

More significant are the cases in which 24 does not characterize as a moral dilemma a choice situation which meets the criteria of a standard dilemma. Here are some examples of choice situations I identified as standard dilemmas, but which 24 did not characterize as moral dilemmas:

- Bauer Tortures Rossler (5, 1pm) – Discussed above
- Bauer Shoots Miriam Henderson (5, 5pm) – Jack Bauer enters the home of Christopher Henderson, a former CTU operative who is now one of the terrorist collaborators, and his wife Miriam. Bauer threatens to shoot or torture Henderson, but Henderson replies that with his training and experience he can withstand any pain and thus withhold the information Bauer needs. Bauer agrees,

and instead shoots Miriam Henderson in the leg, threatening to follow up with a permanently disabling shot to the kneecap, in an effort to convince Henderson to cooperate. *This may be the only way to acquire Henderson's cooperation, but surely, on any moral theory that would allow the possibility of a moral dilemma in the first place, harming an innocent bystander in this purely instrumental way counts as a wrong that is not made up for morally by whatever good ensues from a successful result.*

- Bauer Summons the LAPD (5, 11pm) – Bauer and associates break into a bank's safety deposit vault to acquire a recording which ties the terrorist conspiracy to the highest levels of the U.S. government. Before they can leave, some of the conspirators arrive at the bank. If found in the bank, Bauer may be killed or be deprived of the recording. So Bauer trips a silent alarm summoning the LAPD, anticipating that they will start a firefight with the conspirators that will endanger many officers but may provide Bauer and company with an opportunity to escape. *In essence, Bauer is leading unsuspecting police officers to their death in a fight they are unlikely to win, in an attempt to provide cover for him to pursue his admittedly vital mission. Since Bauer is at this moment a renegade CTU agent, the officers would presumably not consent to take part in the firefight if its true purpose was known to them. There is perhaps a kind of necessity to Bauer's action, but a seeming wrongfulness as well.*

The prevalence of standard quandaries and standard dilemmas in 24's narrative, on the one hand, and the discrepancy between 24's moral characterization of the

situations and that dictated by the standard philosophical account, on the other, are in fact closely related: indeed they are essentially cause and effect. For it is the very proliferation of moral quandaries and dilemmas, I want to suggest, that helps to undermine the applicability of the standard philosophical account of a moral dilemma to the world of *24*. In a world in which moral quandaries and dilemmas present themselves to us in such abundant supply, how can we not come to see these as commonplace and, eventually, as less problematic, reserving our recognition of true quandaries and dilemmas for those cases that truly are beyond the pale? And perhaps in the world that Bauer and his associates “really” inhabit, this approach may make some sense as a psychological coping mechanism (though on the standard philosophical account it cannot be ethically permissible to simply move the goalposts in this way, as though the morally troubling aspects of these situations did not remain intact). But the danger is that *24* does not seem quite content to leave the matter there. The show’s clear implication is that Bauer and company are emblematic of the endemic problems confronting America in the post-9/11 age, and that consequently what goes for *24* goes, equally well, for the agents of America wherever they struggle against its terrorist enemies.

24 Dilemmas

How has *24* been able to consistently succeed in defining dilemmas down in this way? The answer lies in two narrative strategies the show employs. One, which we have just considered, is the proliferation of morally problematic situations, which helps to desensitize the viewer to the moral stakes of any particular choice through the sheer numbness induced by constant exposure to exacting ethical challenges. The other key

method *24* uses to define dilemmas down is its strategy of substituting for the standard dilemma what I call a “*24* dilemma”: that is, the kind of choice that *24* itself, as a text, is willing to acknowledge as being genuinely dilemmatic.

What we are interested in here are moral quandaries that *24* itself characterizes as genuine dilemmas. Sometimes the moral conflict at stake is between the vast public consequences of a proposed action, on the one hand, and its relation to one’s private responsibilities on the other. Some examples of this kind of conflict include:

- Bauer Botches the Palmer Assassination – Discussed above. (1, 5am-8am).
- Tony Almeida Chooses to Save Michelle Dessler (3, 8am-10am) – CTU Director Tony Almeida’s wife, Michelle Dessler, is kidnapped by a terrorist mastermind seeking to release a deadly virus within the United States. He cooperates with releasing the terrorist’s daughter from custody – CTU’s only point of leverage for preventing him from releasing the virus – to ensure his Michelle’s safe return.
- One Doctor, Two Patients (4, 2am) -- Lee Jong, a Chinese official with information vital to stopping the launch of a nuclear missile, sustains a vital injury in a firefight at the Chinese consulate. Bauer rushes him to surgery in CTU’s medical unit, but finds the only available doctor has already begun a critical surgical operation on Paul Raines, who is not only the estranged husband of Jack’s lover Audrey but also sustained his injury while saving Jack’s life. Bauer points his gun at the doctor and orders him to save Lee Jong’s life rather than Raines’s – knowing it will not only cost an innocent man his life but also may well cost Bauer himself a chance at happiness with Audrey, who still cares for Raines.

- The Mother with the Kidnapped Daughter (5, 10pm) – The First Lady’s aide, Evelyn, has vital information about the complicity of President Logan in the nerve gas conspiracy. When her daughter is kidnapped, however, her duty to reveal what she knows runs up against a strong countervailing moral pressure (though she ultimately chooses to risk her daughter’s life to fulfill her public duty).
- Audrey’s Life versus Evidence of Logan’s Guilt (5, 12am-1am) – Terrorist collaborator Christopher Henderson holds Jack’s girlfriend Audrey hostage in order to bargain for evidence of the conspiracy that Jack has acquired. Henderson cuts Audrey’s left brachial artery, and forces Jack to turn over the evidence in exchange for allowing Jack time to call for medical assistance.

Another category of 24 dilemmas includes cases in which the moral conflict is between performing a presumptive moral duty (including, but not limited to, saving thousands of innocent lives) and refraining from some form of presumptively wrong conduct. Some examples include:

- Teri Substitutes Herself for Her Daughter (1, 8am) – Teri Bauer and Kim Bauer, Jack’s wife and daughter, have been kidnapped by terrorists to compel Jack’s cooperation in the attempt to assassinate presidential candidate David Palmer. One of the kidnappers tells Kim to come with him into the next room; his clear intent is to rape her. Her mother offers herself to the kidnapper instead, arguing that he will enjoy himself more with an acquiescent partner than with Kim, who will put up a fight. The kidnapper agrees.

- President Palmer Orders the Torture of Roger Stanton (2, 6pm-8pm) – President Palmer knows that a nuclear bomb is going to be set off in Los Angeles sometime in the coming 24 hours. He strongly suspects his national security advisor, Roger Stanton, of being complicit in the conspiracy. Palmer authorizes his personnel to torture Stanton to acquire whatever information he may have.
- The Trial of David Palmer (2, 2am-7am) – Persuasive but inconclusive evidence suggests that the plot to set off a nuclear bomb in L.A. was sponsored by a rogue Middle Eastern state. The Vice President strongly believes that any delay in attacking will cost thousands of lives due to the loss of the element of surprise, but President Palmer disagrees. Mike Novick, President Palmer’s chief of staff, firmly agrees with the Vice President, but hesitates over whether to cooperate in the Vice President’s plan to remove Palmer from office using the 25th Amendment so that the attack can be speedily launched.
- Letting the Child Abuser Go (with the Child) – Discussed above (5, 1pm)

A third category of 24 dilemma involves cases where the lives or wellbeing of a comparatively few innocent persons are traded to preserve a substantially greater number of lives, but by means of a deliberate choice to cause (or fail to prevent) the deaths of the few in such a way that they are deliberately (and usually fatally) wronged by the choice.

Examples of this include:

- The Pre-Pardon of Nina Myers (2, 4pm-5pm) – Terrorist collaborator Nina Myers has information vital to stopping a nuclear attack on Los Angeles. She is offered immunity from prosecution for her information, but she feels she will never be

- safe as long as Bauer (whose wife she murdered) is still alive. She asks the President for a pardon for her own prospective murder of Bauer, effective before she commits it. The President must decide whether to include this unusual pardon provision in the immunity deal.³²
- The Execution of Ryan Chappelle (3, 5am-6am) – A vital lead developed by CTU regional director Ryan Chappelle promises to locate a money trail that will help capture terrorist Stephen Saunders, who is holding the country hostage with the threat of releasing a deadly virus. Only Chappelle possesses the expertise to follow up the lead effectively. Saunders informs the president that if Chappelle's body is not delivered to a specified location in one hour, he will release the virus. The president must decide whether to order the execution of a loyal and innocent CTU agent to buy time to prevent the virus's release.
 - Nerve Gas in the Shopping Mall (5, 2pm) – Jack Bauer is following a group of terrorists to their hideout when he observes them entering a suburban shopping mall. The terrorists as a whole are in possession of twenty canisters of nerve gas, and Bauer and company fear that they plan to release one canister in the mall. They consult the President, who must decide whether to prevent the release of nerve gas in the mall, or permit it in order to follow the terrorists back to their headquarters to hopefully forestall the release of the other nineteen canisters. (“The terrorists are forcing us to make a tragic choice,” the President observes.)
 - Permitting the Assassination of the Russian President (5, 3pm-4pm) – Terrorist leader Vladimir Bierko, in possession of twenty canisters of nerve gas, threatens

³² This case is treated in considerable detail in Georgia Testa, “Palmer’s Pickle: Why Couldn’t He Stomach It?” in *24 and Philosophy*.

to release the canisters in populated areas unless President Logan discloses the motorcade route of visiting Russian President Suvarov and his wife (to facilitate an attempted assassination). On learning that her husband plans to turn over the motorcade route details, First Lady Martha Logan enters the limousine with her friends the Suvarovs in an attempt to force her husband to prevent the ambush. Secret Service Agent Aaron Pierce, unaware of the plot, insists on accompanying Mrs. Logan, and she is unable to prevent him from entering the motorcade with her.

■ Bauer Shoots Miriam Henderson – Discussed above (5, 5pm)

What all these cases have in common are the grand scale of the incalculable consequences they engage, combined with the wild implausibility of the circumstances which put these values at risk. The combination of these two factors takes what according to the standard philosophical account is a moral tragedy and transposes it into the register of an ethical farce.

An important part of what enables *24* to succeed in its redefinition of the traditional notion of a dilemma is that it manages consistently, through the device of the *24* dilemma, to turn the standard dilemma (that is, the moral dilemma proper) into a parody of itself. *24* dilemmas are so extreme, so far beyond the familiar boundaries of sane moral choice, that when a standard dilemma appears alongside it – when, for example, you put next to any of the mad circumstances described above a standard dilemma such as the decision to torture to obtain information vital to saving lives – it begins to appear not only rather prosaic but indeed also rather silly by comparison.

There is, in addition, one more important reason why *24* contains so few observable instances of what it is willing to acknowledge as a moral dilemma: and this is to be found in the unusual temporal compactness and concision of the show's narrative.³³ Because events on *24* happen in real-time, there is very little opportunity for *deliberation* about the moral stakes and quality of the choice in question. But this in turn makes it much more difficult to generate an effective narrative representation of a moral dilemma. To recognize a moral dilemma as such in the actions of others, we need to be able to observe some aspect of their deliberation, either before or after the fact.

This does not mean, however, that a drama like *24* is incapable of representing a moral dilemma, as shown by the few but clear cases depicting a *24* dilemma. What it means instead is that the *scale* of the moral conflict or consequences engaged by a dilemma in *24* must be truly extraordinary, far beyond the bounds of the standard case, in order to engage our heroes' attention as containing any moral significance at all. And this in turn results in our gradual and subtle acquiescence in this redefinition of what counts as genuine moral conflict. It works a quiet magic over its viewers, one which incrementally redraws the boundaries of our moral outrage to make them more conducive to the moral extremism of a post-9/11 age.

The Moral of the Story

³³ On the narrative impact of these aspects of the show, see Paul A. Cantor, "Jack in Double Time: *24* in Light of Aesthetic Theory," in *24 and Philosophy*. Cantor's account of the use of Shakespearean "double time" in *24* reinforces my claim that *24*'s use of its time scheme to define dilemmas down is a deliberate narrative choice, since if the show wanted to use ethical deliberation as a device to signify the moral difficulty of a particular decision, Cantor's "double time" would presumably afford a convenient means of accomplishing it.

The first great book in the Western tradition to argue for a philosophically coherent politics, Plato's *Republic*, also argued that the most serious danger to such a politics lay in the power exercised over a community by its culture, and specifically by its modes of entertainment. In the *Republic*, Socrates famously declared that the poets and the tragedians would have to be banished from his ideal Kallipolis because of the threat their compelling arts posed to the virtue of its inhabitants. Notoriously, Plato went on to apply this principle to promote a wide-ranging censorship of seemingly innocuous beliefs and stories, giving Plato's arguments on these points a (largely deserved) reputation for puritanism and paranoia. Yet Plato is surely right about one key point: namely, his claim that there is a deeply political dimension to poetry and drama, since they claim to tell us important truths about the character of the good life and the qualities of fine and just actions.³⁴ Narratives – especially narratives about heroes and their deeds – are seductive: they invite not only our enjoyment, but our surrender to their spell. For any audience captivated by this spell of the narrative arts, “the pleasure they take in what happens to others necessarily carries over into what happens to them.”³⁵ The myths in which we revel tonight gradually and insensibly become the practices we live out tomorrow.

Culture matters: and thus the various philosophical and moral lessons implied by our culture matter as well. They matter because they help to define our sense of the morally possible and impossible; they matter because they shift our ethical focus, and define our ethical blind spots. When a show like *24* helps to conceive, however casually, a vital philosophical concept like that of a moral dilemma, its effects may potentially be much wider (at least in the short term) than that of the most sophisticated academic

³⁴ *The Republic*, 599b-601d.

³⁵ *The Republic*, 606b.

argument. And there is considerable evidence to suggest that it is having such an impact both in the wider culture and specifically among those fighting the war on terror. *24* lead writer Howard Gordon comforts himself with the thought that “people can differentiate between a television show and reality,” while star Kiefer Sutherland stresses that *24* is “just entertainment,” merely a “fantastical show” that uses torture as “a dramatic device.” But Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, the dean of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, disagrees: he recently flew to Hollywood to plead with *24*’s producers to alter their portrayal of torture, citing the corrupting effect on the legal and moral sensibilities of current officer cadets. Diane Beaver, the military’s top lawyer at Guantanamo, has remarked that Jack Bauer and *24* gave U.S. interrogators “lots of ideas” regarding interrogation models.³⁶ (The show’s effect on practice in the front lines of the war on terror was recently verified by a study by the U.S. Intelligence Science Board). Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, a fan of the show, says that it “reflects real life” and that it accurately portrays how those fighting the war on terror must try to “make the best choice with a series of bad options.” Popular talk-radio host Laura Ingraham has argued that the fact that Americans “love Jack Bauer” is “as close to a national referendum that it’s O.K. to use tough tactics against high-level Al Qaeda operatives as we’re going to get.”³⁷

24 is a frequently entertaining and occasionally riveting piece of political theater, and by itself that is all to the good. But when *24* contributes to making it more difficult for us to see hard ethical cases as *being* hard cases, when it makes it easier for us to see murder and torture and betrayal as nothing more than necessary acts of statesmanship and

³⁶ Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side*, p. 196.

³⁷ Except where otherwise cited, all quotations in this paragraph are from Jane Mayer, “What It Takes.”

survival, when it helps to deaden our sense of moral tragedy by stretching melodrama to the point of parody and farce, it does us a grave disservice. Such ethical revisionism can over time help to impair, not just our aesthetic sensibilities, but also those ethically sensitive judgments and practices out of which true citizen virtue alone can emerge.³⁸

John M. Parrish
Loyola Marymount University

APPENDIX

Day 5	Standard Quandary	Standard Dilemma	24 Quandary	24 Dilemma
7am	3	2	1	0
8am	3	0	0	0
9am	2	0	2	0
10am	1	1	1	0
11am	0	0	0	0
12pm	2	1	2	0
1pm	3	2	3	1
2pm	2	2	2	2
3pm	4	2	3	2
4pm	3	2	2	1
5pm	2	1	1	0
6pm	3	2	2	1
7pm	3	1	3	0
8pm	6	2	2	0
9pm	5	2	1	0
10pm	3	2	3	1
11pm	4	2	1	0
12am	5	2	2	1
1am	6	2	4	1
2am	8	4	4	0

³⁸ Sincere thanks to Paul Cantor, Joshua Dienstag, Margaret Hrezo, Joel Johnson, Wayne Le Cheminant, Susan McWilliams, Eric Rovie, Travis D. Smith, Charles Turner, David Williams and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments regarding this essay.

3am	4	1	1	0
4am	4	0	1	0
5am	7	3	3	0
6am	6	3	1	0
Total	89	39	45	10